REDOING AFGHAN HISTORY: UNDOING "NATION," REIMAGINING SPACE

Introduction by Professor Robert Crews

Sahar Khan's essay grew out of a course devoted to the history of modern Afghanistan. Her highly original work explores one of the most pressing challenges facing scholars of Afghanistan: how do we make sense of the extraordinarily diverse experiences of Afghans who have lived through more than three decades of civil war? What strategies of representation best allow us to reconstruct lives marked by trauma, struggle, and survival? Khan's essay is a thoughtful critique of narratives that narrowly adopt the lens of the Afghan state or that reduce complex figures to simplified ethnic or national types. But this is more than a work of criticism. She also explores a creative solution: her essay investigates two novellas by the contemporary Afghan writer, Atiq Rahimi, and shows how his fictional work alerts us to alternative conceptions of identity, time, and space that deepen our understanding of the Afghan past by bringing us closer to the experiences of Afghan men and women who so closely resemble Rahimi's protagonists.

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Sahar Khan

"Les historiens sont des raconteurs du passé, les romanciers des raconteurs du présent." (Historians are storytellers of the past, novelists are storytellers of the present.)
-Edmond de Goncourt (b. 1822 – 1986), French writer and founder of Académie Goncourt

Though the novelist may typically write a story about the present and the historian a story about the past, boundaries between the historian and the novelist's professional terrains are not so rigidly demarcated as the past flows into the present and vice versa. In the following analysis, Atiq Rahimi's novellas, *Earth and Ashes* and *The Patience Stone*, are used to make forays into unfilled gaps in traditional political histories of Afghanistan like Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Whereas Barfield's historical study emphasizes and traces the formation of nation and state, Rahimi's novellas on human experiences of war reveal a conflicting process, the breakdown of a national consciousness. Rahimi's narrative treatment of space and temporality deconstructs Barfield's "nation" to depict the various human constituents of history – Afghan people of different classes and genders, who are simultaneously alienated from the central "nation-state" *and* impacted by its wars. In doing so, Rahimi conveys the distance between the structures and protagonists of political histories and his own characters. If the Afghan malaise has been the marginalization of the majority of Afghan people, then the project to combat marginalization can begin with the historical project bringing the margins to the forefront on their own terms rather than under the shadow of nation and state.

The Place of Space in Hi(story)

The space and scale of a historical narrative decisively determine the emphases in portrayals of historical processes – large-scale national spaces more readily emphasize larger structures of state machinery or abstractions like nationalism rather than the small-scale happenings that often comprise the building blocks of historical incidents. Wali Ahmadi, a Persian literature specialist, focuses mostly on the former space in his discussion of Afghan literature as a receptacle for a "national" past and "national" vision

for the future. He says, "modern literature in Afghanistan can indeed be read as an allegory… that is 'national' – because it imagines and narrates the national community/society of modernity"[1] and that the "purposive aesthetics [the vision for the future]" are "principally engaged with the development of the *nation* and the *state*…."[2] Though this formulation of national literature as a seer of "historical progress" is disputable on several levels, for the historian the most pressing danger of a nation-based narrative is explained by Aijaz Ahmed. Ahmed suggests that if the Third World's most historically formative experience is presumed to be imperialism and colonialism (and the response to that being nationalism), the world is divided into those who make history and those who are mere objects of this making. In telling the latter group's history, the spaces of imperialism and nationalism overshadow the motivating forces of history – the internal multiplicities of interrelations based on class, gender, nation, race, region etc. (see full quotation).[3] Hence, Ahmed's observations raise concern regarding the way in which nation-oriented narratives that grow out of the national-global space of colonialism and responsive nationalism relegate Afghan people to the role of passive objects of history.

In contrast to this national space that potentially objectifies the Afghan people, Rahimi's smaller spaces highlight the "multiplicities of intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region" that Ahmed emphasizes. More importantly, both of Rahimi's texts defy Ahmadi's national pressure on purpose and teleology because *The Patience Stone* and *Earth and Ashes* end in a very ambiguous and unresolved way. Hence, I raise the question of how effective "nation" is as a framework to study Afghanistan. Given Afghanistan's historical pattern of the alienation of the margins by central national structures, there is a need to de-center the Afghan historical narrative and view peripheral objects rightfully as the main subjects of history. In envisioning this de-centering, Rahimi's local and small-scale lens and emphases are explored as a meta-framework to push the limits of historical thinking about modern Afghanistan. From the outset, it is important to ask if the use of wartime literature as a heuristic for historical writing solely applies to wartime histories. This paper is an experimental starting point for further reconstructions of Afghan history.

Barfield and the National Background

Thomas Barfield's comprehensive history of Afghanistan is entitled *A Cultural and Political History*, however, the cultural component is not as incisively conveyed as the political component. By and large, the cultural history is found in the introductory chapter, which divides up Afghans into ethnic groups, demarcates broad living styles and identifies historical trends. These themes are not traced throughout the book in order to show

change over time. Barfield states the aim of his study:

> Afghanistan itself remains just the vague backdrop in a long-running international drama where others hold the speaking parts. It often appears that the Afghans provide only an unchanging, turbaned chorus in this play – that is, except for their ever-newer weapons. This book takes a different track. It views the Afghans themselves as the main players to understand the country and its political dynamics, examining the question of how rulers in Afghanistan obtained political legitimacy over the centuries and brought order to the land.[4]

Though Afghanistan emerges as a "nation" and "state" shaped by a wide array of factors and internal and external actors in Barfield's narrative, the "Afghans themselves" remain a backdrop in a national drama where others, the various changing rulers and emergent political parties, hold the speaking parts. Even the orientation of Barfield's searching questions reveals that the approach is tilted towards issues of state, its rulers and structures of governance - "How did a ruling dynasty established in 1747 manage to hold power over such a fractious people until 1978, and why has the Afghan state since then experienced such difficulties in reestablishing a legitimate political order?"[5] This is not to say that Barfield's narrative completely ignores the margins but he explores them in a much more allusive and partial rather than a specific way. For instance, he says, "The post-2001 model of government in Afghanistan that attempted to restore a direct-rule model remains at odds with the realities of Afghanistan, and the Kabul government lacks the military and administrative capacity to implement it."[6] After identifying this dissonance between the "realities of Afghanistan" and the project of politics, Barfield does not launch into a discussion of those "realities." A possible reason why Barfield does not discuss this is that the scope and lens of Barfield's study are not appropriate for the very close-level, local and incisive approach that may be required in order to study "realities of Afghanistan."

For instance, differences between portrayals of the Soviet war in Barfield's and Rahimi's narratives significantly elucidate how Barfield's history eclipses a key part of the lived experience that Rahimi's perspectives and emphases suitably capture. In Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes*, the insightful teashop owner, Mirza Qadir, says to the elderly protagonist Dastaguir, "Brother, the logic of war is the logic of sacrifice. There is no 'why' about it. What matters is the act alone, not the cause or the effect."[7] In contrast to this framework for understanding war as a moment in and of itself, Barfield's account of the invasion is organized around what came before and after the

moment – the causes and effects. As American historian Jack H. Hexter writes, this tendency to focus on cause and effect of a moment may lead to negligence of the matrix of intersecting factors that constitute the basis of a moment (see full quotation).[8] Barfield discusses the consequences such as "war-induced urbanization" that "tripled the population of Kabul,"[9] but not *how* this urbanization came about (i.e. those "patterns of human activities which form the basis of the coherence of historical accounts."[10]). Set during the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* is the story of Dastaguir, father of Murad, grandfather of Yassin, husband and father-in-law. His story reveals the micro-level workings of a much wider war and how this war seeps into everyday life and drastically alters social, gender and familial relations. Barfield depicts the politics of war rather than this culture of war and Hexter contextualizes a possible reason for Mirza Qadir's preference for understanding war as an act alone.

In focusing mainly on consequences like "urbanization," the "connections and interrelations of 'times, places, persons and circumstance'" and the people who are actually enduring the procedures are somewhat overshadowed by the "nation." Barfield's narrative cannot realistically accommodate a molecular level configuration of the interactions between different people and the way in which war internally wreaks havoc on human structures and relationships. Importantly, Barfield suggests that, "To prevent Amin's defection and restore order to Afghanistan the Soviets invaded on December 27, 1979, using provisions of the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of 1978 as their justification."[11] He continues to acknowledge the local insurgencies and rural resistance but does not shed light on how the people remain a backdrop to global-historical-national forces. This is not a negation of narratives like Barfield's because such broad narratives are crucial for a holistic understanding; however, shortcomings in such narratives are a point of departure for the current analysis. In Barfield's longitudinal and holistic history, an insider's nuanced experience of the moment of war (or any other moment) falls by the wayside. And, in contrast to Barfield's history, Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* and *The Patience Stone* reveal an internal breakdown of structures, categories and nation through the disruption of familial relationships and gender norms, effectively bringing the people to the forefront.

Rahimi's Novellas – A Man's History and Her-Story?

Though the protagonist Dastaguir's family's experience is the center-piece of *Earth and Ashes*, Rahimi's configuration of space suggests a broader historical moment in which Afghan lives are indelibly impacted by distant global/national presences. So, their lives are connected to these forces that are disconnected from them in the sense that the novella's characters do not completely know or understand the Russians. This is seen in the first

mention of their invaders which has a very distant and questioning tone: "I hear the Russians reduced the whole village to smoke and ashes last week. Is it true?"[12] In contrast to this broad, questioning conjecture, given this literary format, Rahimi imagines and zooms in on Mirza Qadir's understanding of the Soviet invasion:

> 'My friend, in this country, if you wonder why something happened, you have to start by making the dead talk... Awhile back a group of government troublemakers came to our village to enlist fighters for the Russians. Half the young people fled, the other half hid... Not even a day had passed before the Russians came and surrounded the village. I was at the mill. Suddenly, there was an explosion. I ran out. I saw fire and clouds of dust. I ran in the direction of my house...'[13]

This broad global-national space that concerns "the Russians," "this country" (Afghanistan) and "the government" is superimposed on a smaller space of the "village," "the mill" and Mirza Qadir's "home" which is the space of the lived experience. So, the dissonant connection between these two spaces becomes evident in this narrative.

In addition to space, Rahimi's canvas and historicization are shaped by his treatment of temporality, which elucidates Dastaguir's understanding of a historical narrative that is markedly different from a traditional narrative of modern Afghanistan. Nation and globality are constructed through a linear and orderly trajectory of history, where fixed categories are delineated, causes and effects are identified, boundaries are defined and a "nation" emerges. On the other hand, Dastaguir's narrative is multi-linear and chaotic. When Dastaguir discusses with Mirza Qadir that the roles of Rostam and Sohrab have been reversed, he strays off into his past when he was "a child of about Yassin's [Dastaguir's grandson's] age."[14] This is just one of many junctures at which Dastaguir digresses and moves forward and backward in time with unselfconscious disregard for a structured storytelling pattern. Why is the narrative so disrupted? The experience of destruction has disrupted their lives in as tangible a way as the breakdown of the senses as is depicted in Yassin's experience. The fall of the senses is an internal and very physical experience but, for Yassin, it restructures his experience of the external world: "Yassin's world is now another world, one of silence. He wasn't deaf. He became deaf. He doesn't realize this. He's surprised that nothing makes a sound anymore."[15] Yassin's world is one in which "The bomb was huge. It brought silence. The tanks took away people's voices and left. They even took Grandfather's voice away.…"[16] Yassin's experience as a child is another experience that can not practically and specifically be

incorporated into an orthodox historical narrative. Yet, representation of the child's historical experience and ruptured psyche is where history's most potent claim to the future lies because, as clichéd as it is, like any other nation, Afghan children represent hope for the "nation's" future.

Not only is Yassin's sense of hearing and structure ruptured but his grandfather is deeply disoriented, part of which is evident in his and the novella's distorted temporality and historicization. From Dastaguir's perspective, many categories and differences have collapsed as is represented by Rahimi's choice of second person, which discards the difference between "you" and "me." *Earth and Ashes* begins with "'I'm hungry,'" immediately followed by "You take an apple from the scarf…"[17] Other than this melding of different narrative viewpoints, Dastaguir discusses how the difference between "friend and stranger"[18] no longer exists and that distinctions between "question and answer are in vain."[19] On so many levels, in his view, differences of structure have collapsed, which is also represented in the recurrent motif of how life for a survivor and witness of destruction is death itself, signifying that the line between the living and dead is blurred. This smashed psyche is most provocative in Dastaguir's traumatic dream:

> Yassin calls for his mother. His voice has become high-pitched like hers… You look at his body. It's the body of a young girl. In place of his small penis, there is a girl's vulva. You are overcome with panic. Without thinking, you'll call for Murad. Your voice is stuck in your throat. It reverberates in your chest. Your voice has become Yassin's – weak, confused, questioning: "Murad. Murad! Murad?"[20]

In the excerpt above, the multiple conflations of gender (male-female) and relationships (mother-son, son-father, father-son) indicate how severely fractured Dastaguir's human consciousness is. There is no room for Dastaguir's chaotic, non-linear and ill-defined experience in the structuralist perception of time and space in a political history. Still, how can the abstract category of nation be discussed given the strong likelihood that the most basic and concrete units of category, gender and relationships, have ambivalent meanings in the individuals' psyches? With a broken sensual perception, how can a coherent human consciousness exist? Where the human consciousness is so severely debilitated, how can something as transcendental as a national/collective consciousness be conceived? Hence, in contrast to the emphasis on "purposive aesthetics and poetics" of "nation" and "modernity,"[21] Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* raises an alternative question: To what degree does "nation" remain a constructive tool for understanding Afghanistan?

Whereas Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* possesses a relatively strong

and specific historicity that is delimited by the Soviet Union's invasion, Rahimi's unnamed female narrator's story in *The Patience Stone* belongs to an immemorial and non-specific past. Dastaguir conveys greater concern with tropes of the public sphere. Hence, the impact of war is felt in a more societal way than the war's very private effect on the familial life in The Patience Stone. Rahimi's male and female protagonists each have different concerns and voices because of the different spheres they inhabit. The lack of spatial specificity that emerges in the opening line of *The Patience Stone* "Somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere"[22] in conjunction with the lack of a historical anchor in a specific moment gives *The Patience Stone* a feeling of an immemorial and mystical past as opposed to that of a historicized nation.

Though "war" (any war) is the mainspring of the female narrator's condition - she has to attend to her injured, paralyzed husband and children alone - she does not have the same concern as Dastaguir does for the war's impact on the "country," its men and its honor. War is a distant event for the female narrator, which necessitates concern only when it disrupts the domestic space: "Far away, somewhere in the city, a bomb explodes. The violence destroys a few houses, perhaps a few dreams… shaking the window panes but not waking the children."[23] Dastaguir and Mirza Qadir have greater concern for the public sphere of country and honor as they often start their contemplation with notions like "My friend, in this country"[24] and Mirza Qadir said, "What are we to do? We're on the eve of destruction. Men have lost all sense of honor… There are no longer any courageous men."[25] Here, it becomes evident that the man's space is a significantly more vast national space than that of a woman's intimate familial space. Though *Earth and Ashes* and *The Patience Stone* are both imaginings of marginal histories, they are on a spectrum – the farther one strays from the national tropes of the public sphere, the more marginalized and untapped possibilities of historical experience are accentuated. Hence, *The Patience Stone* is a gendered narrative, which dares to imagine a marginal world of a numerically non-marginal demographic, that of Afghan women.

Although feminist critics definitely raise valid concerns regarding Rahimi's portrayal of the innermost and most visceral emotions of a woman, the same concern could be raised about any author telling the story of a character of a different race or class. Hence, one could even ask whether or not Rahimi can authentically represent the psychological processes of Dastaguir, a subaltern character of a very different class to Rahimi himself. Authenticity can never be gauged since two people of the same class/gender/race may realistically have different personalities. So, where the historical utility of *The Patience Stone* is concerned, an author's acuity in penetrating a gender power dynamic as a lived experience is more important than authenticity of a character's deepest qualms and desires.

In *The Patience Stone*'s world of the Afghan woman, even the measurement of time is different as the humdrum rhythm of the female narrator's life is contingent on two things, her husband's breaths and her cycle of prayer beads. Hence, two aspects, the man and religion together, are shaping forces in this specific female's story. She even says that "she no longer count[s her] days in hours, or [her] hours by minutes, or [her] minutes in seconds…a day is ninety-nine prayer bead cycles!"[26] Here, temporality is not related to the "nation" or a historically decisive or specific event but the mundane routine of her prayer beads. She reads the external world from the four walls of a domestic space as she continues to say, "I can even tell you that there are five cycles to go before the mullah makes the call to midday prayer and preaches the haddith."[27] As she hopelessly nurses her husband whose ailing position is unchanging, the pace of her life also reflects this stagnation. Consistently through the novella, she is found with "Her shoulders weighed down with troubles, she breathes, as always, to the same rhythm as the man"[28] and when "He is no longer moving. She neither," when "He is breathing heavily. She too."[29] In fact, these two entities that set the pace for her history are psychologically intertwined in her discussion of how she thought of her husband when he was absent from their wedding. She rationalizes,

> 'God is far away, too, and yet I love him, and believe in him…' Anyway, they celebrated our engagement without the fiancé. Your mother said, *Don't worry, victory is coming! It will soon be the end of the war…..and my son will return!...* At the ceremony, you were present in the form of a photo...[30]

Here, the reconciliation of the male presence with the religious presence in her life conflates these two sources of authority: one is felt through her hearing of khutbahs broadcast from an external mosque, which she never frequents and the other was once gone off in war and now is paralyzed. Again, to be reminded of how distant her intimate space is from the public sphere of man and religion, we only ever know her between "the room, the passage, the house."[31]

However, Rahimi's female narrator is far more complex than a mere foil for the pace that man and religion set for her life as she revolts against both driving forces as the the novella unfolds. She criticizes what she perceives to be man's obsession with honor (honor is also a crucial part of "nation" as war is fought for the nation's honor). Her statement, "I have never understood why, for you men, pride is so much linked to blood"[32] is a double innuendo, which relates to her husband's role in a bloody war and his pride when he saw the blood of her chastity on the white sheet. Even though

she does not belong to the man's sphere, she is not ignorant because she tells a story about a war leader who asks his "young soldier, Benam [masculine name signifying honor in Persian], *Do you know what you have on your shoulder?* Benam replies, *Yes, sir, it's my gun!* The officer yells back, *No you moron! It's your mother, your sister, your honor!*"[33] After establishing weapons and war as a man's honor, she goes on to explain how futile the pursuit of honor is from her perspective because her husband's pursuit of honor has left their family in a most destitute condition. She emasculates him by telling his motionless body that he is an "empty presence" and that he was a "clumsy body" in bed because, even though she has two daughters, he is not their father. Through this much smaller space of the woman's world, the reader sees the tangible effects of war on family and a very interesting perspective on the man and nation's elusive pursuit of honor. Furthermore, the cyclical/static temporality expressed through the cycle of prayers and her husband's static condition is, in a way, a statement about Afghanistan's history, which has so thoroughly been punctuated by recurring war. Especially from a domestic female experience of history, the war raging on outside of the home is simultaneously a cyclical and unchanging condition. The specific historical moment is inconsequential because from this woman's perspective, some or the other conflict has always disrupted her marital/familial life. Here, we are able to imagine some (though not all) of the contours of what an Afghan women's history might look like.

By rendering her husband a patience stone (sang-e-saboor), an inanimate object that absorbs her grievances, Rahimi de-centers the historical narrative to make the female the center-piece. Her act of defiance makes her husband's life contingent on her life rather than vice versa as she says, "Look, it's been three weeks now that you've been living with a bullet in your neck. That's totally unheard of! No one can believe it... Your breath hangs on the telling of *my* secrets."[34] This signifies a reversal of gender hierarchy, however her main challenge to religious structures comes *after* her revelation of her daughters' real father:

> Suddenly, she screams, 'I am *Al-Jabbar*!'
> Murmurs, 'I am *Al-Rahim*…'[35]
>
> If all religion is to do with revelations, the revelation of a truth, then, my *sang-e-saboor*, our story is a religion too! Our very own religion!" She starts pacing. "Yes, the body is our revelation."… "Our own bodies, their secrets, their wounds, their pain, their pleasures…[36]

At first, she likens herself to God by using two of the ninety-nine adjectives for Allah in the Quran for herself. Then, she brings into play the notion of a revelation, however her revelation is one that pertains to a very intimate,

familial sphere. It does not have the ground-breaking historical impact in the space of the wider world that Prophet Muhammad's revelation had. Her revelation of the "body" is a very tangible revelation as opposed to the abstract revelations of ideas that concern humanity at large. Throughout the novel she builds a thematic between the soul's alleged "honor" and the suffering that the "body" (/bodies) endures for this honor. Her revelation of the body is the culmination of her lack of physical fulfillments, the fact that she and her daughters are starving or even how her husband always sought his own sexual pleasure, was never soft with her and was unable to give her pleasure. It is important to note that, even in her revolt, she is complex and a product of a conservative Afghan society; she subconsciously harbors inhibitions when she says something irreverent. Even after her final revelation, she expresses qualms such as: "What am I saying? Why am I saying all this? Help me, God! I can't control myself. I don't know what I'm saying…"[37]

Conclusion

Obviously, Rahimi's narratives are fiction and not exact in their portrayal of a marginalized experience. However, Rahimi's narratives are proposed as a heuristic meta-framework that enables us to imagine and push the limitations of our own knowledge of Afghan "nation" and "society." This thought experiment is rooted in an understanding that has emerged after a survey of historical, anthropological and political literature – that the Afghan "people" have more often than not been opposed to the political figures beholden to foreign powers who serve as the main subjects of traditional narratives. Furthermore, the emphasis on Afghanistan's fragments and marginal experiences through Rahimi's novellas has revealed that the "nation" is not a constructive category. This is because in national-global spaces of nationalism and colonialism, Afghan people can only exist as acted-upon objects in the process of history. By emphasizing the internal multiplicities of gender, class, region, etc., I propose a non-national meta-framework, which re-centers Afghan people as subjects of history. We began with the historian making inroads into the present and, because the past flows into the present and the present into the future, we conclude with the historian with a stake in the future. From clarifying the people's narrative of the past arises the possibility of a more just and hopeful prophesy for the future.